The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism and Biopolitics. By Robin James. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019. 245pp. ISBN: 978-1478006640

Robin James' latest book is a compelling and rewarding showcase of her ability to use music and sound as a means to interrogate an array of contemporary philosophical, political, cultural and scientific perspectives, which she gathers together as the 'The Sonic Episteme'. Her primary goal is to expose what she sees as an unrecognised, but ultimately pernicious, tendency across a range of disciplines to develop universal analytical and critical frameworks that are, mistakenly, based on what she terms a theory of 'acoustic resonance'. For James, therefore, the sonic episteme is a way of knowing that wrongly uses notions of universal harmony, and the harmonising results of statistical analyses of universal noise, to justify problematic assertions of social and cultural equality within contemporary neoliberal and biopolitical power structures.

Chapter One takes aim at Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, and James sets out a coherent reading that sees Attali creating an equivalence between the governing principles of 'neoliberal political economy' (p. 27) to 'the laws of acoustics' (Attali, in James p. 26). This also establishes the book's core narrative; exploring and challenging such assumed relations between the supposedly natural laws of sound and theories of political, economic and cultural knowledge. James illustrates this point by quipping that 'noisy sonic distortion is the most bourgeois thing ever' (p. 24), a reference to the Pet Shop Boys' 'Love Is A Bourgeois *Construct*', asserting how neoliberal and biopolitical structures use 'statistical forecasting' (p. 27) to systematise chance events to exert power. However, via an analysis of Taylor Swift's 'Shake It Off' she goes further to suggest how 'uncool' (p. 41) and white 'nontransgressiveness' (p. 44) have now displaced noisy individualism as strategies for elites to 'financialise their whiteness' (p.48) and 'compound white supremacy' (p.49).

Chapter Two brings into focus the key problem, as James sees it, that results from an epistemology that understands economic, political and cultural structures as the manifestations of an underlying universality. Here, her targets are particular notions of 'heterogeneity' (p. 62) and 'diversity' (p. 63) that she identifies with 'a post-identity discourse that claims to overcome conventional practices of social exclusion' (p. 58). James alights on Adriana Cavavero's 'politics of vocal resonance' and Fred Evans' 'theory of the "multivoiced body"' (p.60) as highly problematic examples of the sonic episteme, which - albeit unknowingly - mask divisive politics with seemingly broadly inclusive theories of equality. For James, their elitist notions of hybridity mask the 'politics of exception', which she describes as 'what happens when neoliberal market logics are used to maintain white supremacist patriarchy' (p.,66). She suggests that 'both Cavavero and Evans think voice is superior to social identity as a basis for political membership or personhood' (p.69).

From here onwards, James' focus is on destabilising notions of post-identity politics; perhaps the book's most profound contribution to theoretical discourse. She proposes that Cavavero's

argument for the universality of voice creates a politics of exception by obscuring the particularities of identity, and Evans' interest in 'overcoming purity with hybridity' via the evolution of 'elite tastes' for 'omnivorousness' (p. 72), is similarly problematic. James reflects how 'nonelite traditions' that resist incorporation by a 'global elite' can come to be judged as exclusive, pure, and the exception to new biopolitical norms where 'hybridity has become respectable' (Evans in James, p. 73).

In response, James references the work of Devonya Havis, whose 'study of black women's philosophical methods' (p. 75) enabled her to understand how the technique 'sounding' emerged from black women's lived experience 'as a call to consider the framework and context from which [one's] actions or choices issued' (p. 76). James' view of sounding as a technique and a mode of understanding that sits outside of recognised modes of academic thought, clearly emphasises her commitment to acknowledging and learning from nonelite perspectives. She uses Havis' notion of sounding as an act of 'feigned complicity' (p. 77) to reason that, within the 'BBHM' music video, Rihanna's harnesses 'pornotroping' - 'the pornographic pleasure that is taken in producing race [via] a repeated sadistic white pleasure in black female suffering' (Nash, in James p. 79) – to 'pivot' to a new presentation of black women that is beyond the neoliberal coding of the sonic episteme; one that registers 'full political status' and 'personhood' (p. 86).

Chapter Three focuses on New Materialism. James states that its 'failure to engage black studies and work by black scholars is another instance of philosophical aversion' (p. 114), and puts forward Christina Sharpe's theory of 'wake' and Ashon Crawley's concept of 'choreosonic vibration' as nonelite alternatives (pp. 110-120). She problematises New Materialism, along with the established edifices of philosophical and musicological analysis, on the grounds that each draws from the wellspring of white male academia. For James, these analytical methods focus on notes and scores, and the conventional expression of meaning through words, and therefore occlude communication patterns that occur in what she sees as non-white contexts, including the 'aspiratory patterns' (p.117) of singers and gospel-inflected rhythms. Perhaps the one weakness in James' approach in this book is her reading of Karen Barad's work, which is selective in order to fit the wider narrative. Barad does focus on general rules relating to the behaviour of particles at the quantum level, rather than on movement of specific particles. However, her concept of *Agential Realism* (Barad, 2007) – wherein a phenomenon becomes a topological aggregate of processes, rather than a thing in itself - is in many ways a strong analogy for how James understands lived experience to be a valid source of alternative philosophical and epistemological models. Whilst the chapter would benefit from a more sustained analysis and critique of its subject matter, fundamentally, James is calling for a new philosophical episteme, grounded in the practices of gospel music and sermons, and the music of Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and Rihanna.

Along with the remaining analyses of 'Neoliberal Sophrosyne' (Chapter Four) and 'Social Physics and Quantum Physics' (Chapter Five), in this book, Robin James has created a coherent discourse around the twin concepts of acoustic resonance and the sonic episteme. By

aggregating vernacular and nonelite ways of knowing, as expressed through a range of music and sound practices, she has succeeded in developing credible and coherent alternatives, and there is much to learn from these five essays.

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Reference:

Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.